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ABSTRACT

A study examined the proportion of locally born residents working in marine occupations on Saint Croix and the reasons why these workers on the island chose their occupation. All 43 Saint Croix businesses and agencies employing workers in marine occupations were asked how many persons they employ and where those workers were born. Marine employees' reasons for selecting this occupation were determined through interviews conducted at randomly selected businesses/agencies and at the local fishing regulatory agency. Of the 218 workers in marine occupations and 44 fishing workers about whom information was obtained, 19.5% were locally born, 63.3% were born in the United States, and 17.2% were born elsewhere. Interest in the marine environment was cited by 76.4% of the respondents as their main reason for choosing a marine occupation, and 95.6% of those respondents attributed their interest in the marine environment to their early childhood experiences. It was concluded that the attitude of avoidance toward the sea that has been assimilated into the culture of the Virgin Islands may indeed be keeping young Virgin Islanders from being introduced to the marine environment in a constructive manner and may thus be keeping them from considering job opportunities in the marine environment. (MN)

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Choosing a Career in Marine Occupations: A Cultural Issue

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Choosing a Career in Marine Occupations: A Cultural Issue

A visitor to the U.S. Virgin Islands is immediately struck by the overwhelming presence of the sea - its color and scent permeate the atmosphere of the islands. These clear productive seas provide enormous opportunities for employment. In addition to fishing, the Islands' diverse marine life and clear warm waters provide abundant opportunities for recreational industries and other marine related occupations. The marine recreational industry alone is estimated to be 7% of the Gross Territorial Product (Strickland & Quinn, 1992). Indeed, the waters of the Virgin Islands are one of the their most valuable natural resources.

Although many opportunities exist for employment in the marine occupations, there is a perception that these are not recognized and enjoyed equally by all parts of the population. Jobs in water sports, marine science, and yachting seem to be dominated by individuals from the U.S. mainland, and many of the fishermen and small boaters are from other Caribbean islands such as Puerto Rico.

Despite their proximity to the sea, historically Virgin Islanders are not a sea-faring people (Howard, 1950). The construction of inter-island trading vessels did not begin until after Emancipation in the 1840s (Pyle, 1981). It has been speculated that ship carpentry or the construction of any vessel, for that matter, that might enable slaves to sail out of sight was forbidden by anxious slave owners. Indeed, phobias involving the sea may have been deliberately instigated to maintain hydrophobia and isolation (Pyle, 1981). Thus Virgin Islanders' past may have fostered a fear of the sea rather than encouraging a sense of self-efficacy concerning the sea.

The apparent lack of participation in activities which involve marine resources may be the result of traditions and folkways of the Virgin Islands people (Wilgus, 1961). A psychiatrist who worked for the government of the Virgin Islands in the 1950s for two and a half years believes that Virgin Islanders are generally afraid of the water and that water activities in the VI are generally engaged in by people from other islands (Weinstein, 1962). Jarvis (1971) also noted that Virgin Islanders did not engage in water-related recreational activities and that Virgin Islanders generally seemed to fear the sea.

THE STUDY

The purposes of this study were to determine the proportion of locally born residents working in marine occupations on the island of St. Croix, the largest U.S. Virgin Island, and, examine the reasons why workers in marine occupations on St. Croix have chosen this field. By documenting that there is a disparity between individuals working in marine occupations and the general population in terms of birthplace, and possible reasons for this disparity, educators can better design programs, including career guidance programs, to increase representation among under-represented groups.

METHOD

To determine the percentage of locally born Virgin Islanders in marine occupations, all businesses and agencies employing workers in marine occupations were either called or visited and queried about the number of employees in marine occupations and their place of birth.

In order to determine the reasons for going into a marine occupation, individual interviews were done at randomly selected businesses and agencies who employ workers in

marine occupations. Fishermen were surveyed as they visited the local regulatory agency to attend a required workshop on local environmental and safety regulations.

Individuals who were individually surveyed were queried about their place of birth, whether they could swim, and asked "What factor most influenced your reason for pursuing a career which is associated with the marine environment?"

RESULTS

The 43 businesses and agencies contacted provided information about the birthplace of 218 employees working in marine occupations. In addition, 44 fishermen were surveyed. Of these 262 individuals working in marine occupations, 19.5% were locally born, 63.3% were born in the continental United States, and 17.2% were born in other areas (other islands or countries). Figure 1 compares this breakdown with that given by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1984).

A total of 56 people from businesses and agencies, and 44 commercial fishermen, were individually surveyed. The reasons given for going into a marine occupation are given in Table 1. Of the 89 individuals responding to the question "What factor most influenced your reason for pursuing a career which is associated with the marine environment?", 76.4% indicated that it was their interest in the marine environment. Of those who indicated that interest in the marine environment was the major reason for pursuing a marine occupation, 95.6% said that early childhood experiences most influenced this interest. Of the 94 respondents to the question "Do you know how to swim?", 91.5% indicated they could.

DISCUSSION

This study provides evidence that the percentage of locally born individuals employed in marine occupations is less than half that in the general population and, that the percentage of individuals from the U.S. mainland in marine occupations is five times that found in the general population. It is concluded, therefore, that the perception that locally born individuals are under-represented in the marine occupations is accurate. But why does this disparity exist?

This study also revealed that people generally do not go into this field for the money, but because of their interest in the marine environment. In response to individual surveys, the overwhelming majority of those questioned (73%) attributed their interest and involvement in a marine occupation to early exposure. As young children, these individuals observed their parents and grandparents fishing or sailing and became knowledgeable concerning the paraphernalia and patterns of behavior surrounding these activities. It appears that early childhood experiences reinforced interest and promoted a sense of self-efficacy in the marine environment.

If it is true that an attitude of avoidance toward the sea has been assimilated into the culture of the Virgin Islands, young Virgin Islanders may not be introduced to the marine environment in a constructive manner and may not consider job opportunities in this environment. It could be that the past remains an important social force.

Intuitively it makes sense that the more interaction with the marine environment the more interest in it. In support of this Ignatiuk (1978) showed that there was a positive relationship between exposure to field trip activities and interest in science. This suggests that

one way to increase the local presence in this field is to encourage more field activities in the marine environment, especially in the younger years.

Another possible reason that more people do not pursue this field is the lack of educational opportunities. The lack of opportunities for children on St. Croix to learn how to swim could negatively influence the choice of a marine career. The high percentage (91.5%) of individuals surveyed who swim suggests that this may be an influencing factor. The lack of higher educational opportunities in the sciences undoubtedly has an effect on the number of locally born marine science professionals on St. Croix. In an occupation which does not require formal training such as being a fishermen, representation of the local population is much higher, but still lower than that of people from other parts of the Caribbean.

Perhaps there is another component which influences the choice of a marine occupation such as fishing. In St. Thomas, another of the U.S. Virgin Islands, most of the fishermen are of French decent. This study estimated that on St. Croix, over half the fishermen are born in Puerto Rico and Vieques and of the fishermen who were born on St. Croix, more than half were Hispanic. Non-Hispanic cruzans made up less than 16% of this sample. Discounting the first and second generation Hispanic-cruzan component, the "local" participation seems very small. Viequensens and cruzan-ricans come from a long traditions of fishing and seafaring. Perhaps fishing, like farming, is perceived as minimal, degrading subsistence work. Future studies might examine local, non-fishermen's attitudes about this type of work.

This study showed that locally born residents are under-represented in marine occupations and suggested that cultural influences may be a factor for this disparity. The data

showed that people tend to pursue this field because of childhood experiences and suggested that exposing children to the marine environment early could increase local participation in marine occupations. However, more research needs to be done in this area to insure that the locally born population benefits fully from one of its greatest resources, the sea.

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Table 1

The Factor Which Most Influenced Career Choice

	No. of Responses	Percentage
Pay Scale	0	0
Availability of jobs	5	5.6
Interest in marine environment		
Early Childhood Experiences in the marine environment	65	73.0
Later experiences in the marine environment	3	3.4
Other factors	16	18.0

Figure 1

Employment in Marine Occupations by Birthplace